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Policing the Golan? No

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American and Israeli officials say they expect U.S. troops to serve as peacekeepers or monitors on the Golan Heights in the event Israel and Syria conclude a peace agreement. Whether the United States should consent to such a deployment is a momentous question. The issue entails risks to the U.S. troops, including the threat of terrorist killings and abductions, increased likelihood of U.S. involvement in a war if Syrian-Israeli hostilities renew in the future, and an alteration in the U.S. role in the region--in particular, changes in the U.S.-Israeli relationship that could detract from Israel's deterrence capability and harm common interests of the two countries. Only a weighty rationale in favor of the deployment could justify its substantial costs and risks. But proponents have offered no such rationale.

Instead, they belittle the risks and talk generally about the enormous desirability of peace. One can share the enthusiasm for peace, however, without concluding that a U.S. deployment on the Golan would make a necessary or even a positive contribution toward the goal.

Those who would station U.S. forces on the Golan Heights should do more than state without explanation that the deployment is "crucial" or "vital" or "essential" to a new peace agreement. Is the deployment so important because the U.S. forces would actually have a definable mission to perform? If so, it is still sensible to ask whether that mission can be accomplished through less costly and less risky means. Or is the deployment "crucial" simply because some portion of the Israeli public, misunderstanding the role of the peacekeepers, will conclude that American troops will compensate for the security risks to Israel inherent in a withdrawal from Golan territory? If the latter, then the U.S. government should disabuse Israelis who harbor such unrealistic expectations about U.S. military protection. Even Americans eager for an Israeli-Syrian land-for-peace deal should not want Israel's Golan withdrawal premised on mistaken beliefs that can damage U.S. credibility.

Proponents of a U.S. Golan deployment assert that it will be no more hazardous than the Sinai Desert peacekeeping mission in which U.S. troops participate under the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty. As the affirmative rationale, they talk of monitoring, deterring renewed fighting, and demonstrating U.S. support for Syrian-Israeli peace. There is value in all three of these functions, but U.S. troops on the Golan are not required to perform them. And the aforementioned costs and risks of such a U.S. Golan mission would far outweigh the benefits it might yield.

Israel (let alone Syria) will not look to neutral U.S. observers for military intelligence and early warning. Such information is essential to national security and the parties will not "contract out" for it. If pressed, Israeli officials will admit that relying on U.S. troops to provide filtered intelligence according to timetables subject to U.S. policy is not a realistic alternative for Israel, whose survival hinges on early warning and rapid mobilization of reserve forces.

Monitoring treaty compliance is an important function for which the treaty signatories might actually look to a third party. But this job can be done without giving U.S. troops a dangerous and costly long-term assignment on the Golan Heights. If a party wants an American referee for a particular treaty compliance controversy, the United States could dispatch monitors to the area on a case-by-case basis.

Would U.S. troops on the Golan enhance deterrence of aggression, reducing the likelihood of a Syrian military attack against Israel in the future? Might those troops constitute a "tripwire"--that is, a means of ensuring that a future Syrian aggression would trigger massive U.S. reinforcement of the peacekeeping forces?

A U.S. "tripwire" is a rare obligation of a character that requires a treaty commitment duly approved by the U.S. Senate. The Clinton administration cannot create such a tripwire simply by entering into a trilateral peacekeeping arrangement. Israel would err dangerously if it assumed that U.S. peacekeepers harmed in the event of renewed aggression or terrorism would necessarily function as a tripwire. On the contrary, the President might decide to withdraw them altogether rather than reinforce them, as the history of American troop withdrawals from Lebanon in 1983 and Somalia in 1993 suggests.

In any event, the United States should not want to take on a tripwire obligation to enter a future war when there is no necessity to do so. Israel can defend itself. It is not in either country's interest that Israel begin to rely for its defense on U.S. troops. Furthermore, even if it offered to create such a tripwire, the United States lacks military airlift, sealift and other capabilities that would be required to defend Israel, which is very small geographically, in a timely fashion if Syrian armor were overrunning the Jewish state.

It has been contended that U.S. Golan peacekeepers would force the Syrian government to think twice about renewing aggression against Israel, given the dangers of antagonizing the United States. If, however, a Syrian government contemplated starting a war with Israel after signing a peace treaty, it would have to take antagonism of the United States into account whether or not U.S. troops are on the Golan. At most, such troops would play a marginal role in Syrian calculations.

If it relinquishes buffer territory on the Golan Heights, Israel will have to increase its reliance on preemption--that is, revert to the strategy it employed in the days before the 1967 war, when it could not afford to absorb a first blow. The decision to preempt is never easy and would be rendered far costlier if an Israeli preemptive strike would endanger U.S. peacekeeping forces. If Israeli officials faced threatening Syrian troop movements, for example, they would feel compelled to consult with the U.S. government before taking action, even if they concluded that preemption of the Syrian threat is necessary. The U.S. government cannot be expected to endorse fully and readily, if at all and if ever, an Israeli decision to strike first. This is true even though Israeli preemption may serve both Israeli and U.S. interests. It is simply not part of the standard operating procedure of a major power like the United States to authorize its friends to take rapid and unilateral military action.

U.S. officials would raise skeptical questions about the interpretation of the intelligence and would counsel intensified diplomatic efforts to avert military action. Israel's options would then be, first, to defer to the United States and forego preemption, accepting the military dangers that would result or, second, to defy the United States and preempt, notwithstanding the harm that may come to the U.S. peacekeepers and the resulting blame that will attach to Israel. There can be no more dangerous time for Israel to quarrel with the U.S. government and offend the American public than at the start of a war, so Israel would face a grim dilemma with consequences of the highest order. Putting our Israeli allies in such a position is not desirable for the United States.

In sum, U.S. officials must anticipate the possibility (even if they would not actually predict that it will occur) that military tensions between Syria and Israel will rise again after a peace treaty. In that event, U.S. Golan peacekeepers are more likely to deter Israel from taking defensive action than Syria from initiating an aggression. This is likely to be one of the gravest and most perverse consequences of the U.S. deployment.

The analogy between U.S. peacekeepers on the Golan and those already in the Sinai cannot withstand analysis. The dangers on the Golan would be far larger for a number of reasons, including the fact that the Sinai is roughly 150 miles wide while the Golan is 10, hence Golan peacekeepers would be squeezed tightly between two heavily armed parties; the Sinai has no substantial population, while the Golan region's many towns and villages could provide effective cover for terrorists; the Golan borders south Lebanon, the world center of international terrorism; Syria's relations with Israel

and the United States, even if a peace treaty is signed, will be of far lower quality than Egypt's have been.

The issue of U.S. forces on the Golan Heights involves large stakes for the United States. It deserves rigorous thinking. There is nothing that the U.S. forces would do there that would make them important, let alone indispensable, to the achievement of peace between Syria and Israel. It is an assertion, not analysis--and a negligent assertion, at that--to say that if one favors peace one must favor U.S. troops on the Golan Heights. Airy contentions about the obligation to demonstrate, through U.S. peacekeeping forces, America's support for the peace process are no substitute for a proper cost-benefit study of the matter. Such a study can lead to only one conclusion: U.S. forces on the Golan Heights would make a net negative contribution to regional peace and security and to other U.S. national interests. If Israel and Syria are informed that U.S. peacekeepers are not in the cards, they can plan accordingly as they negotiate security arrangements for their anticipated peace treaty.

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